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Germany and the European East in the Twentieth Century

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John Hiden

The present slim volume arose from seminars held at Oxford, where visiting German academics presented the original papers. The aim of the series in which Eduard Mühle's book appears is to present the results of recent research by German historians, on the assumption that otherwise they would be inaccessible to many English readers. Since it hard to imagine any serious student of German history not being able to read much of the original research on which the papers are based, the inference must be that the books are aimed largely at the non-specialist or informed general reader. That demands a clarity and directness of expression that most of the contributors manage to achieve, for most of the time at least.

Mühle himself sets a good standard, generally managing to make the different contributions in his book look more coherent overall than they really are. His deft introduction traces the evolution of the conciliatory character that finally came to mark German relations with the European East at the close of the twentieth century. Ambitiously, he wants the volume to explore not just the political and economic dimensions of this development but also aspires to trace the 'mental maps' of Germans towards the European East. Aficionados of the labels deployed over the years to avoid the pitfalls of the term 'Eastern Europe' will mentally record that the expression, 'European East' is, in effect, little more than shorthand for the

territories to the East of Germany.

Peter Krüger's opening chapter, on the European East and Weimar Germany, concentrates largely on foreign policy. Perhaps because he is distilling the findings of his earlier massive work (*Die Aussenpolitik der Republik von Weimar*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1985), his paper suffers slightly from over-compression. He gives precedence to the Soviet Union because in his view it had precedence for Weimar Germany. Another constant he finds in Weimar policy is the support given to German minorities in the East. In fact he chooses not to explore the implications of the minority problem for German foreign policy, relating it in passing mainly to domestic considerations. He rightly observes that the Rapallo agreement between Germany and the Soviet Union in 1922 never marked a fundamental turn to the East, adding that the German government 'did not know what to do with the Soviet Union except to keep relations correct and to maintain the vague hope of making common cause with it against Poland in an uncertain future.' (p. 13) He could have added an impossibly distant future, in so far as Gustav Stresemann prioritised relations with the West. As Krüger concludes, 'Locarno was a starting point which gave Eastern Europe its best chance for security and stability in the whole interwar period.' (p. 25)

Manfred Hildermeier's chapter on Germany and the Soviet Union begins by stressing the similarities connecting Germany to Russia, before going on in fact to dwell on the many obvious differences between the two powers. It is not so much that there are serious contradictions in his basic argument, rather that it is over-ambitious and he does not appear to have given himself enough time to think it through properly. It might well reflect the demand to produce the original seminar think-piece for publication under pressure.

By contrast, Gert von Pistohlkors presents a highly informative and very clear analysis of Germany and the Baltic region. It is all the more readable for eschewing the jargon that creeps into other contributions in this book. Gerhard Hirschfeld's overview of Nazi Germany and Eastern Europe is a workmanlike study of the leading instigators and practitioners of Nazi policies towards Eastern Europe that eventually also attempts the perhaps impossible task of getting inside the skins of 'ordinary German soldiers'. In Hirschfeld's view, these invariably did not need Nazi ideology and propaganda to view Eastern Europeans as 'dirty', 'filthy' and 'slimy'. Such an attitude, Hirschfeld argues, was not simply a 'reflection of Nazi racism, rather it preceded it.' (p. 85) There is of course nothing particularly new in this contention.

Michael Müller's article on Poland and Germany, like the chapters by Pistohlkors and Hildermeier, takes the story through to more recent times. He compares the damage inflicted by Germans on Jews with that caused by Germans to Poles and as a result sees a 'special relationship'. (p. 92) However, he also reminds us that 'Poles and Germans place the Second World War in different chronologies' (p. 93), before tracing the impact this has had on their differing memories of the pre-history of that terrible conflict. Although he tries to assess shortcomings in Poland's stance towards Germany, he remains convinced that there was little alternative to Warsaw's 'combined strategy of confrontation and compromise with Germany.' Poland, Müller goes on, certainly 'overestimated the scope for political bargaining.' (p. 98) It is surprising to find not even passing reference on this point to more recent Stresemann studies, given the professed purpose of the book to inform about newer research.

The editor himself eventually takes on perhaps the most difficult task of the seminar series, in trying to outline the 'European East on the Mental Map of German Ostforschung'. The essay turns out to be above all an informative and thought-provoking account of Hermann Aubin's life and work. The analytical device employed by Mühle is a comparison of three of Aubin's major essays written at different points. The core images that the author finds in the work of this indefatigable Ostforscher 'consist of the eastward migration of the German people, the transfer of culture and the civilizing of the East caused by this migration, and the intricate demographic and ethnic, but also cultural and political, interdependence of Germans and East Central Europeans.' (p. 125)

In the last two chapters, both also spanning the years from pre- to post-Second World War, Hans Lemberg first essays the mutual perception of Czechs and Germans. He works from the assumption that there was no uniform German mental map of the European East, largely because various German mental maps exist. His

illuminating survey looks in particular at the images of Reich Germans, Austrians and Sudeten Germans. He notes in particular that 'The elements of their respective judgements with regard to Czech affairs merged from 1938 and, even more so, during the second half of the twentieth century?' (p. 148), when the societies of the two German states and Austria absorbed transferred Germans from Czechoslovakia. Finally, Axel Schildt does what he can with the subject of relations between the Federal Republic of Germany (oh, distant memory) and Eastern Europe.

While here and there over-compression and occasional obscurity of argument betray the origin of the chapters as seminar papers, and a few grammatical errors have escaped the editor, much ground is covered in Mühle's small volume; non-German readers will certainly be able to derive profit from it, even if the specialist will find few surprises.

The editor thanks Professor Hiden for his review, and does not wish to comment further.

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